

SHIVAT TZION:
INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS OF THE RETURN TO ZION
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Shiur #17: Introduction to *Nechemia* (*Nechemia* chap. 1)

An Overview of the *Sefer*

As we begin our study of *Nechemia*, it is worthwhile to consider an overview of the *sefer's* chapters:

- 1 - Nechemia hears of the Jews' struggles; he prays
- 2 - Nechemia is sent to Judea; Sanbalat's opposition; Nechemia scours Jerusalem's walls
- 3 - Building Jerusalem's wall
- 4 - Fending off enemy opposition
- 5 - Nechemia combats economic inequality in the Jewish community
- 6 - Completing Jerusalem's wall
- 7 - The census of *olim*
- 8 - The *teshuvah* revolution
- 9 - The great confession
- 10 - The oath
- 11- 12 - A further census of *olim*
- 13 - Nechemia's final activities

A cursory glance at this survey makes it clear that many of the concerns we encountered in *Ezra* remain relevant in *Nechemia*: the arrival of a new leader on the scene; opposition from the indigenous population; the importance and challenges of construction; censuses of the *olim*; and mass ignorance and repentance.

Authorship

Unlike *Ezra*, *Nechemia* is written in the first person, making it more likely that he authored much or all of his book. The Talmud variously maintains that Ezra (*Bava Batra* 15a) or Nechemia himself (*Sanhedrin* 38a) was the author. Modern scholars have generally assumed, on the basis of literary similarities, that *Ezra* and *Nechemia* were compiled by the same individual, sometimes called the "Chronicler." More recent scholarship, maintains, however, that *Ezra* and *Nechemia* were compiled by a different editor than *Divrei Ha-Yamim*. Be that as it may, there is good reason to assume that at minimum, the first-person sections were authored by Nechemia or someone in his

circle.¹ In so doing, Nechemia, along with chapters 8-9 of *Ezra*, authored what might be considered the earliest Jewish memoir.

Setting the Stage

It is Kislev in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, in Shushan, the capital city. Chanani, one of Nechemia's brothers (most commentators explain that they were not literally brothers, but rather close friends), approaches with others from Judea. Nechemia inquires as to the welfare of the community. Chanani responds that the situation is dire: "The survivors who have survived the captivity there in the province are in dire trouble and disgrace; Jerusalem's wall is full of breaches, and its gates have been destroyed by fire" (1:3).

Nechemia is shaken by the news. He cries and mourns for days, fasting and praying desperately. Calling out in the name of God, Nechemia confesses that the Jews and his family have sinned. Nevertheless, he beseeches God to remember His commitment to ingather the Jewish people to the place endowed with His name, Jerusalem. Turning to the task at hand, Nechemia pleads for mercy as he, the king's wine-bearer, is about to make a request of the king.

Nechemia the Leader

Having previously closely examined the introduction to Ezra's character, we are now in position to compare and contrast his introduction with that of Nechemia. Indeed, our chapter invites a series of comparisons between the two. While both arrive under grave circumstances – each travels to Jerusalem at great personal sacrifice to guide a struggling community – there are a number of obvious differences between the two introductions. First and foremost, none of the trappings we saw in the case of Ezra are present for Nechemia. Only one generation of the latter's lineage is outlined, not seventeen. Whereas Ezra was introduced as an accomplished scholar who had diligently prepared himself, Nechemia arrives on the scene with little fanfare.

The significance of this distinction is unclear. Possibly, it is merely a function of the respective literary characters of each work. Nechemia writes in first-person narrative, and so is perhaps appropriately hesitant to shower himself with appellations. If so, it is worth contrasting Nechemia's early humility with his later self-promotion. As we will explore later in our series, on numerous occasions Nechemia asks God for recognition of his achievements. Indeed, the rabbis viewed this as arrogant, and they criticized Nechemia. It is possible that the rabbis felt that Nechemia allowed his success to go to his head, suggesting that his early modesty gave way to later hubris.

Beyond the text's bare-bones introduction to Nechemia, in his recent book, *Nechemia: Statesman and Sage*, Dr. Dov Zakheim notes a number of intriguing lineages and identifications offered by the rabbis. Working with the rabbinic and not the scholarly chronology, the Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 38a) equates Nechemia and Zerubavel, a

¹ Dov Zakheim, *Nechemiah: Sage and Statesman*, pp. 8-9.

scion of the house of David. Another view in the same Talmudic passage suggests that Nechemia was a scion of the Davidic dynasty. Even more extreme, Arizal goes so far as to propose that Nechemia possessed the same soul as the son of David and Batsheva (see Zakheim, p. 26).

The common denominator of all three identifications is that Nechemia represents a continuation of the Davidic line. This fits quite nicely with our earlier suggestion that *Ezra-Nechemia* is to be seen as a continuation of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*.²

Nechemia's Prayer

We previously discussed Ezra's prayer in response to learning of the problem of intermarriage, which plagued the Jewish community during *Shivat Tzion*. As in the case of Nechemia's introduction, here too a comparison between Ezra and Nechemia's respective prayers proves illuminating.

First, similarities abound. Both prayers are triggered by a devastating report about the Judean community. Each sits on the ground, cries for an extended period of time, and, at the time of that prayer, has yet to interact significantly with the returnees (Ezra has just arrived and Nechemia is still in Shushan).

The prayers' content match up nicely as well. Both recite confessions, invoke God's covenant, use the term *meila*, and humbly declare the Jews nothing more than God's servants.

But the differences are equally noteworthy. Ezra refers to God as "*Hashem Elokai*," "Hashem my God"; Nechemia, by contrast, invokes "*Elokei ha-shamayim*," "God of the heavens," the same language used by Cyrus in his call for the Jews to return to Israel.³

More broadly, the *tefillot* are almost opposite in their purpose, especially regarding their relationship to *Shivat Tzion*. Ezra prays for forgiveness *despite* the return to Israel. He sees the Jews as having spurned God's benevolent gift, yet he beseeches

² There is also extensive debate as to the timing of Ezra and Nechemia's respective visits. For a bibliography, see J. Blinkensoff, *Ezra-Nehemia: A Commentary*, pp. 139-140. See also the sources cited in n. 1 of Aaron Demsky, "Who Came First, Ezra or Nehemiah? The Synchronistic Approach," *HUC Annual* 65 (1994): 1-19. For our purposes, it suffices to make three observations. First, as both are active together in *Nechemia* chapter 8, the default must be that they operated together. Second, given the disparate nature of their respective roles, scholar and politician, it is not especially surprising that they do not otherwise appear together in *Ezra* or *Nechemia*. Finally, the current majority scholarly view seems to prefer the position that Ezra preceded Nechemia's arrival by approximately 13 years. We have preferred this approach in our discussions.

³ Also of note is the fact that Nechemia seems to count the months beginning with Tishrei, as evident from a close reading of the beginning of his first two chapters. Ezra, by contrast, considers Nissan the first month of the year. Regarding the calendar, too, Nechemia seems to follow the Babylonian/Persian convention, whereas Ezra does not. Some have suggested that this difference demonstrates that Ezra and Nechemia are to be viewed as two fundamentally different works, even if they are counted as one in the rabbis' calculation.

Hashem to forgive them anyway. Nechemia makes the opposite argument, asking God to fully remember His guarantee to provide for the Jews of Judea a stable and secure existence. This distinction is simply a function of the differing circumstances that precipitated Ezra and Nechemia's respective prayers.

Another, more revealing, distinction should be noted between the confessions. Nechemia, much more so than Ezra, laces his *tefilla* with rich allusions to prior Torah texts and personalities. There are multiple references to Moshe Rabbeinu in particular and Chumash generally. Nechemia refers twice to the "Torah that You commanded Moshe your servant" (1:7, 8), and he refers to "the great and awesome God, who stays faithful to His covenant with those who love Him and keep His commandments" (1:5). This picks up on parallel phrases in *Devarim* (10:17) and the Ten Commandments (*Shemot* 20:5, *Devarim* 5:10). The heart of Nechemia's argument is drawn from God's promise to disperse the Jewish nation due to their sins, but ingather them upon their repentance (*Devarim* 30:1-10). Finally, the reference to the chosen place of God (1:9) picks upon the central motif of *Parashat Re'eh* (see especially *Devarim* 12:5, 11, 15, 18). The irony of Nechemia invoking Moshe Rabbeinu is striking, given that we have already argued that it is Ezra, not Nechemia, who is to be seen as a modern-day Moshe.⁴

Nechemia draws on other biblical characters and references as well. Verse six alone features three such allusions, color-coded to distinguish among the three:

Let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open to receive the prayer of Your servant that I am praying to You now, day and night, on behalf of the Israelites, Your servants, confessing the sins that we Israelites have committed against You, sins that I and my father's house have committed.

The first phrase picks up on *Tehillim* 130:2, a psalm often recited in times of crisis, in which David beseeches God to be attentive to our prayers. The second clause references Shlomo's moving prayer upon the dedication of the First Temple, in which he asks God to fulfill His promise to King David, hear the Jews' prayers at this holy place, and forgive them accordingly (I *Melakhim* 8:29-30). The final section reflects the high priest's confession during the sacrificial service of Yom Kippur (*Vayikra* 16:11,21). It is striking that in this verse alone, Nechemia conjures the traditions of the Davidic dynasty (David and Shlomo), which we have already associated with Nechemia, and the high priest, which we might have otherwise associated with Ezra, of priestly lineage.

Many explanations might be offered for Nechemia's extensive reliance on Biblical precedent. Possibly, in light of Ezra's unique scholarship, Nechemia sought to establish his *bona fides* as a serious scholar in his own right, lest anyone think he was merely a politician. In this respect, Nechemia followed the models of figures such as Yosef, Mordechai, and Esther, who were deeply religious Court Jews. Alternatively, perhaps Nechemia felt that due to his limitations as a scholar, as least relative to Ezra, it was only appropriate for him to entreat God by relying on his Biblical forerunners.

⁴ See also the reference to the service of *Yom Ha-Kippurim* in the following paragraph.

Most likely, though, Nechemia recognized just how dire the situation was. The scenario described by Chanani and the others was calamitous. The Jewish community was rudderless, lacking in leadership and direction, and unable to provide basic security for its residents. In addressing the king, Nechemia feared that he was not worthy of the formidable challenges that lay ahead. The only way he would feel secure in making his request from the king was by first invoking some of his outstanding predecessors throughout Jewish history: Moshe, Aaron, David, and Shlomo. Of course, some combination of all of the above is highly plausible.

By way of elaboration, it is worth pointing out that our final interpretation evokes Rav Soloveitchik's assertion that prayer requires a *mattir*, an act granting the petitioner permission to approach the divine. For the Rav, by reciting *Pesukei De-Zimra*, in which we repeat the praises of King David, referring to the miracles of the Exodus before *Shemoneh Esrei*, and especially by invoking the precedent of our forefathers in the opening blessing of the *amida*, we "earn" the right to stand before God.⁵ Although Nechemia's case is dramatically different in that he approaches a human king, a similar suggestion may be made in seeking to understand Nechemia's behavior.

Nechemia the Butler

The chapter concludes with Nechemia noting that he served as the king's butler. In so doing, Nechemia follows the model of Biblical Court Jews such as Yosef, Esther, and Mordekhai, who loyally participated in the royal court while advocating for Jewish interests.⁶ This follows a relatively common Biblical phenomenon, in which the text prefaces a narrative by first providing a crucial detail. At times, the detail serves not only to fill in an element that is critical to understanding the upcoming narrative, but also serves as a central motif in its own right.

A classic instance of this pattern occurs in the case of Yitzchak and the exchange of Yaakov and Esav's blessings (*Bereishit* 27). Before detailing the story of the blessings, the Torah first notes that Yitzchak's eyes had dimmed. On the most basic level, this detail accounts for Yitzchak's inability to distinguish the brothers from one another. On a deeper level, though, it establishes the wider theme of Yitzchak's limited ability to grasp Yaakov and Esav's true characters.⁷

Here too, one of two possibilities presents itself. On one hand, it is plausible that Nechemia merely means to introduce a detail that is a prerequisite to understanding his encounter with the king in chapter 2. Alternatively, Nechemia means to establish the height of his influence at the narrative's outset. The position of butler was exceedingly influential in the ancient world,⁸ and it seems that Nechemia was well off (see *Nechemia*

⁵ *Worship of the Heart*, pp. 148-154.

⁶ The rabbis (*Yerushalmi Kiddushin* 4:1; see also Rashi, *Kiddushin* 69b, s.v. *ha-tirshata*) suggest that Nechemia was granted a halakhic dispensation to drink otherwise Rabbinically prohibited wine due to his important role on behalf of the community.

⁷ For an analysis of this point, see R. Ezra Bick's discussion at <http://etzion.org.il/en/blindness-yitzchak>.

⁸ See Joseph Blekinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemia: A Commentary*, pp. 212-213.

chapter 5, which records that Nechemia personally ransomed Jewish servants). By identifying himself in this way, Nechemia subtly but forcefully emphasizes from the outset that he wields tremendous political influence. These connections will be critical to his success not only in his approach to the king, but throughout all his work in the *sefer*.